

# TRANSIENTS

By Hunter Johnson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Approved by

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Advisor: Associate Professor Durant Thompson

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Reader: Associate Professor Sheri Rieth

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Reader: Dr. Nancy Wicker

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## ABSTRACT

My exhibition *Transients* is an attempt to embrace the process of growth and decay that comes with being human while at the same time showing the beauty in temporary things. Each piece in *Transients* is a battery-powered lightbox containing a translucent image with light shining through it. The process of making the pieces was a complicated and meticulous method of paper cutting. The combination of the difficult process and the translucence of the products reflects the difficulties and impermanence of life.

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## CONCEPT

### **Transient**

adjective · tran·sient \ 'tran(t)-sh(ē-)ənt

**1a:** passing especially quickly into and out of  
existence: transitory <*transient* beauty>

**b:** passing through or by a place with only a  
brief stay or sojourn <*transient* visitors>

(Merriam-Webster)

Humans are transient beings in many ways: our bodies evolve and deteriorate, our minds change, and we pass in and out of existence. I want to show the beauty in the impermanence of life by constructing human figures from translucent materials—the translucence implies that the figures are not permanent forms--and shining light through the figures, creating ethereal effects that emphasize translucence and add allure to the form.

The beauty of transience is reflected in the Japanese aesthetic principles *wabi*, *sabi*, and *yugen*, collectively referred to as “Wabi Sabi.” Wabi Sabi is a concept that means the peaceful acceptance of the process of growth and decay (Saito). I want *Transients* to reflect the graceful resignation that Wabi Sabi references while embracing the inevitable decay of the human form.

## INFLUENCES

Throughout the past four years, I have been inspired by the modern artists James Turrell, Robert Irwin, and Peter Alexander. I have been equally inspired by the painters Johannes Vermeer and Leonardo da Vinci. The composition and subject matter of Dutch Baroque and Italian Renaissance paintings have influenced my thesis work; the techniques and novelty of contemporary artists who use light as a medium also contribute to the ideas in my portfolio.

## LIGHT AND SPACE

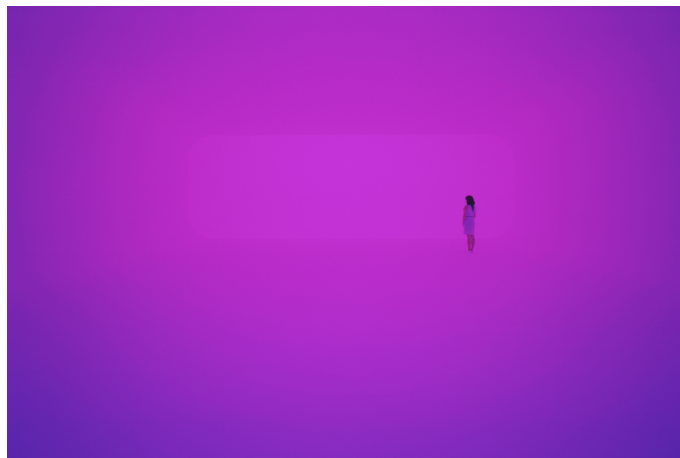


FIG 1: James Turrell, *Breathing Light (from Ganzfelds)*, 2013

The light and space movement was born in California in the 1960's. Light and space artists were influenced by the bright lights of coastal cities, the wide-open skies in desert areas, and the rising popularity of surf and car culture along the west coast. The movement is characterized by the artists' use of light as a medium, minimalist imagery, and artwork with a

very clean and polished feel (Butterfield 8-14). Art from the light and space movement inspires me because the concentration that artists give to their works' locations means that the work significantly impacts the space surrounding it. Additionally, minimalist works from the movement are delicate and clean, traits I would like to apply to my work.

James Turrell and Robert Irwin, both influential leaders of the light and space movement, primarily produce installation works that significantly change and are changed by a viewer's environment. For example, Turrell has a series of pieces called *Ganzfelds* (see fig. 1) that use light and color to strip viewers of their depth perception (Turrell 123). Another of Turrell's installations, *Roden Crater*, transforms a space and interacts with the world around it. Turrell purchased land that includes a crater in Arizona in 1977 and has since developed the inside of the crater to form a dome with rooms that allow viewers to experience celestial events. Turrell describes the project as follows: "Each of the [rooms in Roden Crater] is in itself a piece, and whenever possible, passage from one space to another is worked so that events in the sky effect changes in the space." (Turrell 159). Turrell's description of *Roden Crater*, and the fact that *Ganzfelds* changes depending on the viewer's position in relation to the work, are prime examples of the focus that light and space artists give to the environments that their works inhabit.

In 2013, Robert Irwin built an installation called *Double Blind* (fig. 2) based on a concept similar to that of Turrell's *Ganzfelds*. Irwin filled a gallery with thirty rooms constructed of translucent material stretched over frames. While in the rooms, "depending on

where the viewer is standing and on the direction and intensity of the light, the appearance of the installation changes, as does that of the room itself' (Contemporary). Turrell built *Roden Crater* to allow its inhabitants a focused, unlimited view of light, time, and space; Irwin installed *Double Blind* to encourage viewers to recognize how crucial light, time, and space are to our understanding of the visual world. *Double Blind* is another example of an artist's concentration on the placement of the work and viewers' perception of the work.



FIG 2: Robert Irwin, *Double Blind*, 2013

Peter Alexander's work is typically much smaller in scale than Turrell's or Irwin's, with no installation pieces in his portfolio. Despite the difference in scale, Alexander's work still profoundly impacts the space in which it is displayed. His softly-colored cast resin sculptures capture light and control the viewer's experience of that light (fig. 3). The pieces are clean, smooth, and polished. I want my work to have the finished feel of Alexander's, and I want to learn from his subtle use of translucent colors.



FIG 3: Peter Alexander, *Ocean Blue Drip*, 2011

I hope that *Transients* affects the space in which it is displayed as successfully as Irwin and Turrell's work does while maintaining the subtlety that Alexander's soft color usage and translucent material provides.



## RENAISSANCE AND BAROQUE

During the European Renaissance and Baroque periods, artists developed glazing, a method for painting light (Beck, 61). Painters from those periods focused not only on manipulating paint, but manipulating light, which required them to understand the science of light and the way light interacted with paint. In order to glaze, a Renaissance or Baroque painter would start with an opaque image, typically a neutral gray or brown, then paint transparent layers of pigment mixed with a thinning medium over the foundation image. When the painting was finished, light shone through all of the thin layers and reflected through to the opaque foundation, making the paintings seem as though they emitted their own soft light. Studying glazes inspired me to manipulate light in my work. I do not use light in the same way that oil painters do, but I want to emulate the softness of light that is depicted in paintings by Leonardo da Vinci and Johannes Vermeer.

### JOHANNES VERMEER

The Dutch Baroque painter Johannes Vermeer used glazing to delicately and meticulously imitate light. Vermeer painted pictures of domestic figures rather than religious ones, but his treatment of the light on his subjects gave them a spiritual quality. The painting *Woman Holding a Balance* (fig. 4)



FIG 4: Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, 1664

depicts a richly clothed woman dangling an empty balance from her right hand. Her hair is covered, her eyes are cast downward, and her face is brightly lit (D'Adda, 106-7). His successful technique and subject matter influenced my work; I paint domestic figures and I light them as though they are divine.

### LEONARDO DA VINCI

The Italian Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci also used glazing. The composition of light in Vermeer's painting is reflected in Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks* (fig. 5). Mary kneels with the Christ child, Gabriel, and John the Baptist. Her eyes are cast downward, her face is in three-quarter view, and a strong light illuminates the contours of her cheeks and eyes (Kemp Plate XIV). The central placement of Mary and the composition of the light in both paintings is something I try to emulate in *Transients*. Additionally, I admire Leonardo's attempts to understand the science of optics and light. He was not satisfied by simply knowing how to render light in a painting; Leonardo strove to get at the source of the light that he painted (Kemp 114-119).



FIG 5: Leonardo da Vinci, *Virgin of the Rocks*, 1508

## HALOS

It is difficult to trace the origin of the halo in art because the halo has been an icon across centuries of cultures and religions. However, images depicting haloed figures appear at least as early as 69 B. C. in the kingdom of Commagene (Ramsden 124). The halo may even go as far back as 292 B. C., when the Colossus of Rhodes was built to represent the Greek sun-god Helios (Ramsden 124). Helios wore a crown similar to the crown of today's Statue of Liberty. Buddhist sculptures and coins from the 1<sup>st</sup> century A. D. depict Buddha with a disc behind his head, which is a use of the halo that is also reflected in Medieval European art. (Ramsden 125-6)

According to the author E. H. Ramsden, the halo is a symbol for divine glory (Ramsden 127). It indicates to viewers that subject who wears the halo is godly. I chose to use halos in *Transients* not to express a religious allegiance, but to reflect the idea



FIG 6: Giotto di Bondone, *Lamentation of Christ*, 1304

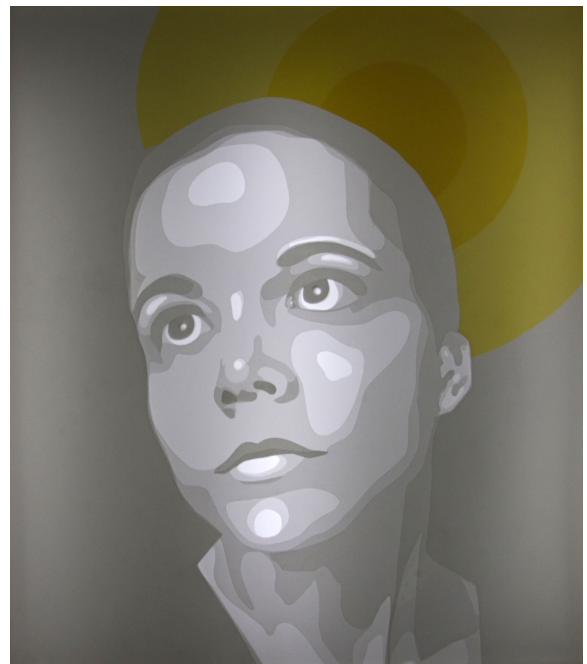


FIG 7: Hunter Johnson, *#1 (unfinished)*, 2016

that mortal significance is as great as divine significance. I also chose to use halos because they are aesthetically appealing—the representation of a halo as a disk behind a figure's head (as they are represented in Giotto's painting, Fig. 6, and in Buddhist sculptures) fits visually with my crisp and simple compositions. To be clear, I am not attributing divine power to my figures in order to commit sacrilege or to be spiteful; instead, I am expressing that humanity is my equivalent of divinity, because I do not believe in gods or immortals.

## PROCESS



FIG 8: *Materials and process used for Transients*

The process required to make my lightboxes is an extremely meticulous and precise method of paper-cutting, although, technically, I do not use paper. I cut shapes from Mylar, frosted translucent sheets of polyester film that are .005 millimeters thick. I then layer the shapes on top of one another to create realistic value ranges that, together, form an image. I call the shapes created by those value ranges “value shapes.” The more layers there are, the darker the image; therefore, single layers are used for the brightest highlights of my images, and eight to ten layers are used for the darkest shadows. Polyester film creates crisp value ranges very effectively. For that reason, my first experience with Mylar was in using the medium strictly to study value, not to make finished works. The medium was so interesting to me and held so much potential that I decided to explore it further. I took the following steps to make finished pieces from the Mylar:

- Chose eight to ten distinct value shapes in each photo used for reference.

- Copied the value shapes onto polyester film (Mylar); sheet number one had the lightest value shapes copied onto it, while sheet number ten had the darkest value shapes.
- Cut shapes from Mylar.
- Layered each sheet of Mylar one on top of the other in order of brightest value to darkest value. Glued together with spray adhesive.
- Stretched entire image over a frame. Slid frame into custom-made box, pre-wired with LED strip lights.
- Turned lights on by plugging boxes in.

## GALLERY EXHIBITION

On April 17<sup>th</sup>, I installed my show in Gallery 130, which is located in Meek Hall on the University of Mississippi campus. In total, my portfolio contained eight lightboxes that varied in size. Below are photographs of the exhibition.



FIG 9: Hunter Johnson, *Transients (7 of 8)*, 2016



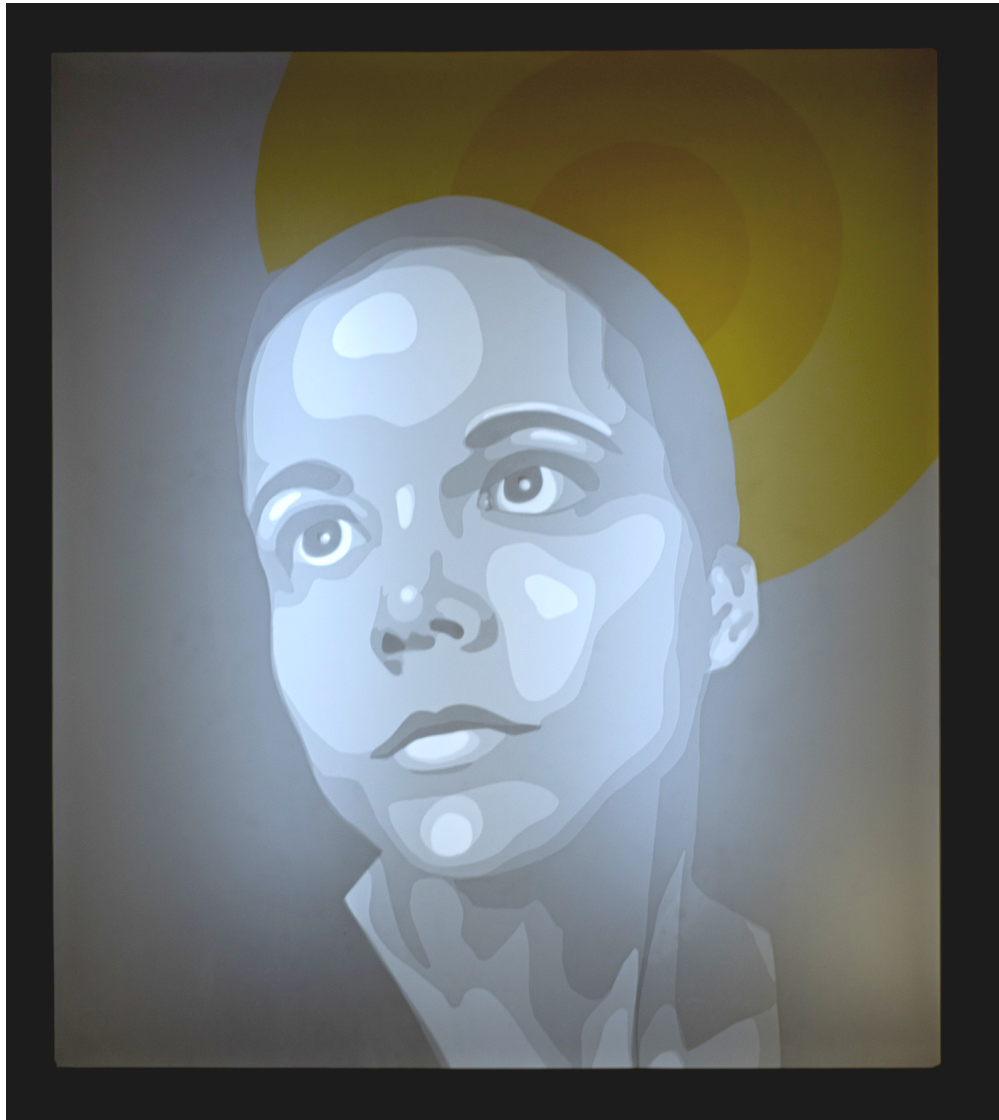


FIG 10: Hunter Johnson, *#1*, 2016





FIG 11: Hunter Johnson, #2, 2016

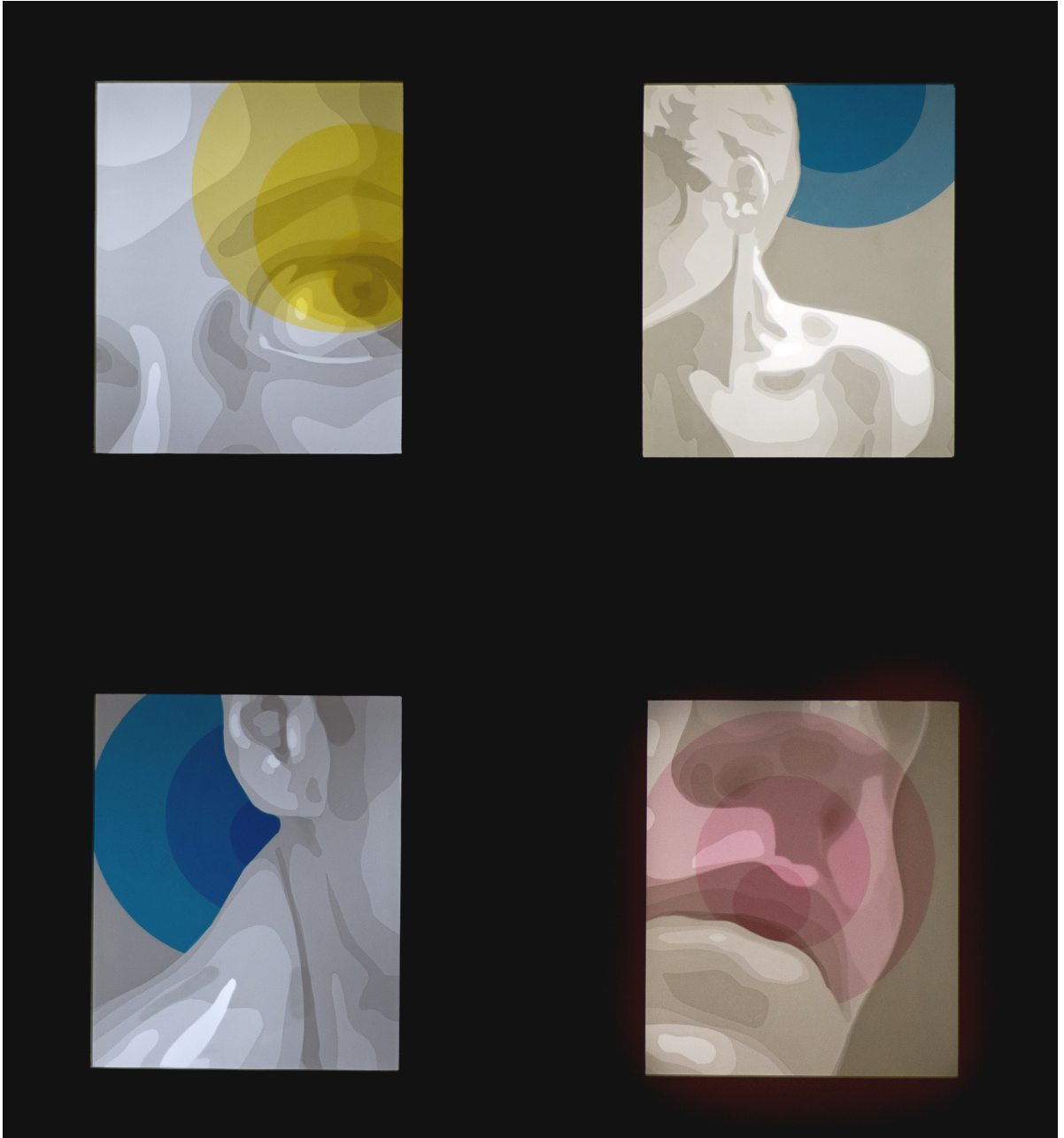


FIG 12: Hunter Johnson, 3-6, 2016

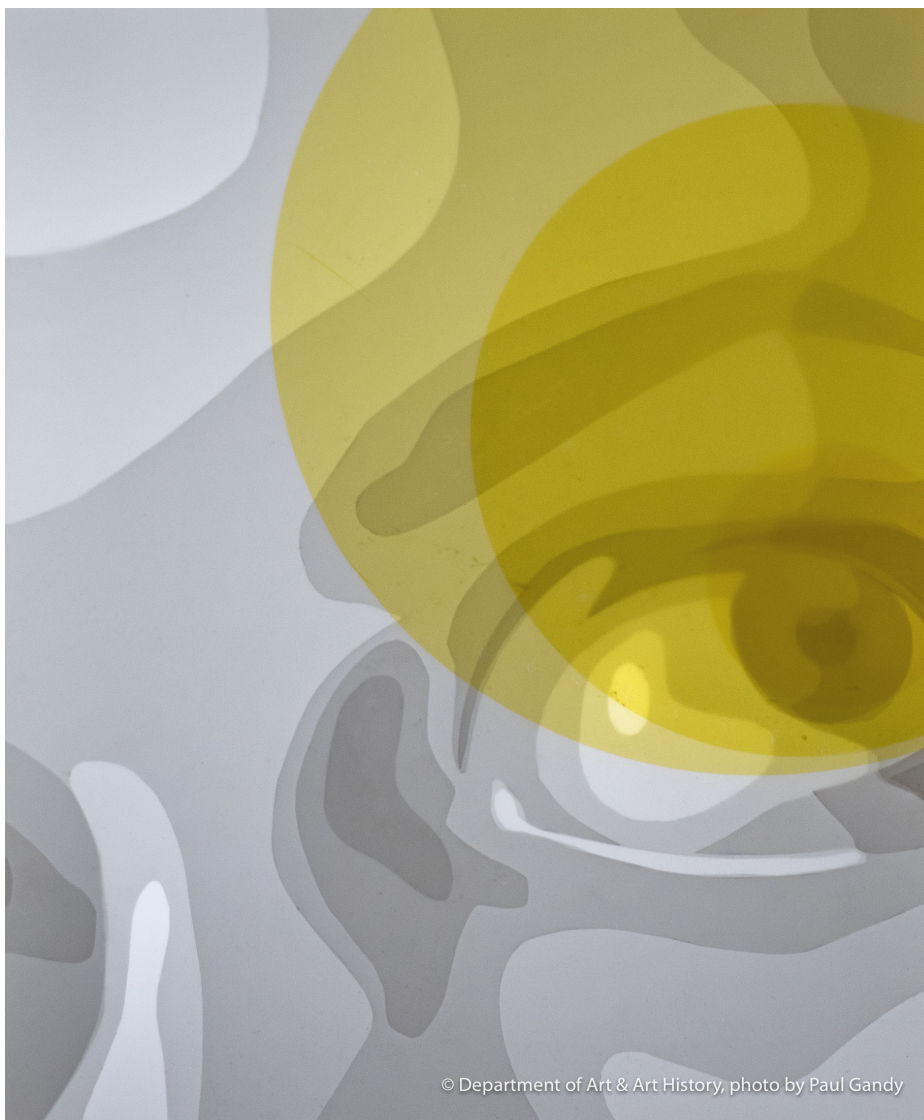


FIG 13: Hunter Johnson, *#3 (detail)*, 2016



FIG 14: Hunter Johnson, #7, 2016





FIG 15: Hunter Johnson, #8, 2016

## CONCLUSION

*Transients* was the most challenging body of work that I have ever made for the following reasons:

1. I had no experience with electronics, wiring, or soldering before I began working on *Transients*. I learned to solder and studied basic principles of amperage, wattage, and electric current just for this project.
2. I had no experience with paper-cutting before *Transients*, either; in fact, I had always assumed that I would not make a good paper-cutter, because it seemed like such a tedious process and I see myself as an impatient person.
3. I needed help with this project—my dad built my boxes for me and my boyfriend taught me how to solder (and even soldered a couple of the boxes himself). I do not like needing help, but to reach my goal before my deadline, I had to enlist some workers. That was difficult for me to admit. If I had to hire strangers for the job, I think it would have been more difficult, because I do not think that anyone could have cared about this project as much as I did. A stranger might have done careless work. Fortunately, I had people I could trust available to help me.

The challenges I faced while making *Transients* taught me more than I have ever learned from any project I have taken on. My lack of electrical experience led me to learn about electricity and lighting. The determination I had to make the images in my head come

to life gave me the patience required to carefully cut shapes from Mylar over and over again. Asking for help stripped me of some of the pride that I had accumulated but had not quite earned. *Transients* taught me that aspects of my personality are as changeable and temporary as my existence is—I am not inherently an impatient person or a prideful person; I am only those things when I decide to be.

I look forward to working more with light in my art. I want to progress to full-scale installations in the fashion of James Turrell and Robert Irwin, but I want to keep the Renaissance and Baroque influences in my work as well. Combining my love of minimalist light art and Renaissance/Baroque painting styles has been difficult and utterly confusing at times (to me and to my instructors), but building *Transients* gave me the confidence and education that I think I need to continue weaving my influences together in future work.

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